A Matter of Faith

ZERO REINTERPRETED

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"Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God...." (Heb. 11:3)

One distinctive tenet of Christian faith is the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* or creation out of nothing. Contrary to many other cosmogonies, the Bible teaches us that God did not create this world out of some primordial substance; the universe is not eternal, but God created the world out of nothing. This is contrary to the natural principle that something cannot come out of nothing. Obviously, this doctrine, though unpalatable to reason, is acceptable to faith. This is not meant to say that faith contradicts natural philosophy, but that it transcends the natural and, therefore, can connect to the reality that gives significance to this universe.

Creatio Ex Nihilo

The writer of Hebrews tells us here that it is by faith that "we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God". Obviously, the doctrine of creation out of nothing implies that the world, as it is, is basically composed of nothing since it was made out of nothing. Without the creative power of the word of God, this world would have remained nothing; in other words, it would not even have existed. Theologians call all created reality as *contingent* since it owes its existence to something other than itself, i.e., to God. Thus, the world is ultimately nothing by itself and in itself. Therefore, idolatry and witchcraft are detested by God since, while the former holds that God can be represented in contingent forms, the latter holds that this universe itself contains the power to meet the gap between being and nothingness, both of which are false beliefs and expressions of false pride and presumption; thus being vain shows, they lead to nothing but eternal separation from God. Faith, however, takes one beyond the fringes of nothingness by reposing in the absolute possibilities of God.

INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

The strong optimism of the faith of God is that it has the infinite power of God on its side and is, therefore, able to see infinite possibilities where natural eyes fail to see even a glimpse of hope. Only infinity spans the difference between being and nothingness. To put it the other way, the difference between zero (0) and one (1) is infinite. Therefore, it takes infinite power to bring out something out of nothing. Obviously, the faith that can understand and perceive the world as created out of this zero-state (not some singularity), is the faith of the most immense kind. In fact, it is the faith that can do anything because for it anything is possible.[1]

The infinite power of God, which is also inexhaustible, is unlike the *contingent* physical force inherent in this universe. Therefore, events, circumstances, and appearances of the world do not matter to the one who has the faith of God. He is not alarmed by them because his faith is above them all. It is transcendental.

The Concreteness of Faith

But it is not abstract. The concreteness of faith is already evident in its being called the substance of things hoped for.

WORLDS IN THE MAKING

The Greek word *aion* (αἰών), translated here as "worlds", can mean "an age", "the universe", or "eternity". It basically carries the concept of being in time. This is not limited to just the creation of the world but extends to also the shaping of history by the providence of God. This is also indicated by the usage of the word *rhema* (ῥῆμα) for "word", meaning "spoken word" or "command" in specific situations. In other words, faith sees history as only meaningful in connection with the will of God. In light of what Hebrews 11 speaks about, viz. the heroes of faith, it may be seen how history was shaped when different individuals at different moments in time responded to the voice of God. God could only shape the ages because people responded to Him in faith. This doesn't mean that He is not free to do as He wills, but that when people responded to Him in faith, they became part of His grand design and thus became part of sacred history. Apart from God, they would have been

[1] This doesn't mean, however, that something illogical like a square-circle or the creation of a necessary being (God) is possible. Illogical or self-contradictory concepts can never have any reality.

reduced to chaotic nothingness. But faith in God took them beyond their limitations and turned their chaotically oriented world into divinely structured histories. By submitting to the Great Architect, they ensured the beautifying of their lives.

The framing of ages was by the specific word of God "so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear." *Creatio ex nihilo* also applies here to the shaping of ages in the progression of time. The faith-heroes brought things into existence out of nothing by their acts of faith in the revelation of God. The impossible was made possible by the faith of God.

FAITH BEYOND PHENOMENA

The word for "things that do appear" is *phainomenon* (φαινομενων) which is in the middle voice and is used in this form only once in the New Testament. It comes from the word *phaino* which means "to shine", "to show", and "to appear". The English word derived from this Greek word is "phenomenon" meaning "thing that appears". A literal rendering of the Greek text would be: "Not out of things that appear (*phainomenon*) were the things that are seen (*blepomena*) made."[2] To the Greek mind, *phainomenon* simply was an appearance or resemblance and not necessarily the actual image of the thing.[3] For instance, a spoon standing in a glass half-filled with water appears to be bent though not really bent. Perhaps, in using the word *phainomenon* here the writer of Hebrews also wishes to say that faith doesn't look at the things that are now apparent to us as the real basis of this visible world. As appearance cannot be the final basis of knowledge, so can it not be the final object of faith. In other words, faith is not controlled by "things that do appear" or phenomenon; on the contrary, it is controlled by the word of God since the worlds were framed by it and not made by the "things that do appear". In fact, they have appeared out of nothing only because God commanded them to be.

The apparent can often confound faith. For instance, as Peter began walking on water by faith in Christ's word, his eyes turned to the winds which appeared to him to be strong (or stronger?) and his heart lost confidence and began to fear. The modern world presents before faith more complications to deal with. While in the pre-technological era it was mythical stories that presented a distorted picture of reality, in modern times it is the bombardment of pictures and virtual reality through television and cinema that distorts reality and presents a false *phainomena*.

The vision of faith transcends the fake realities of this world.

The vision of faith transcends the fake realities of this world. Natural interpretations of the world are never the object of faith. This is why the conflict of faith can sometimes be a tensed one when the mind is wavering between what the natural mind perceives to be and what the Word of God declares to be. The natural mind cannot receive the things of God because they are beyond its understanding. In fact, they might even appear to be absurd to it (1Cor. 2:14). For instance, when Jesus told the mourners at Jairus' house that the girl was not dead but asleep, all of them jeered at Him (Lk. 8:52, 53). But He put them all out, took the girl by her hand and called her saying "Little girl, arise!" And she immediately arose. There was no denying the fact that the girl was dead. But the vision of faith does not terminate with natural facts. It also does not entertain the negativity of those that cannot glorify God because of their lack of faith: that is the reason why He put them all out. The natural fact was that she was dead. The spiritual truth was that she was asleep; because faith is the substance of things hoped for and sleeping anticipates waking. Faith could see beyond the natural appearances of things. What didn't appear to be here was that she was alive. What faith could see here was that she was alive, though sleeping. The word that Jesus spoke brought this faith into visible reality. Thus, "not out of things that appear was this thing that was seen made."

To conclude, one must remember that faith is never self-induced imagination. On the other hand, it is given by God in the sense that the vision of faith is the revealed truth of God. To walk after the imagination of one's heart is evil (Gen. 6:5). Similarly, to walk against the truth of God is also sin (Rom. 1:18). It is not what one is able to imagine or conceive of that is vital to faith. The most important thing is how far one can believe in the truth declared by His Word. True faith cannot be less than final since to believe God is to believe in His infinite power and possibilities. Thus, nothing is impossible for those who can believe in God.

[2] τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων τὰ βλεπόμενα γεγονέναι.

[3] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 25.

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